

WYCOMBE Wanderers threw away the chance of going top of the table in the Rothmans Isthmian League on Saturday when they were held to a draw at bottom club Ilford. And the Blues must be kicking themselves for not capturing three points when they were there for the taking.

I lost count of the number of scoring chances that were missed particularly in the closing stages when two or three simple close range opportunities were spurned. This draw gave Ilford their sixth point of the season and although they worked tirelessly, they should have been put firmly in their place by the visitors.

But Wycombe, after a confident start, showed a marked lack of experience of these situations and fell into the trap of playing their opponents' game. No one was able to settle the side down and play at the pace they wanted.

If the championship is to come to Loakes Park again this season, Wanderers must pick up these 'bread and butter' points against the weaker clubs. Draws like this could prove decisive in the end.

Give Ilford full credit for their gritty performance. They are virtually an amateur team this year with precious little cash to splash about. They rely on effort and guts to gain their results and must stay in Division One this year before they move grounds to Fairlop, a disused airfield not far from Newbury Park.

But even they must realise they were lucky to share the spoils on Saturday. Their woodwork saved them no fewer than three times while goalkeeper Gary Calder earned his keep with a point blank save from Howard Kennedy near the end. Overall, however, the scoreline should have been something like 1-4 instead of the 1-1 draw which must have pleased the pools punters.

It was a particularly disappointing result in view of Wycombe's recent performances. Manager Ted Powell fielded this team for the third game running with Alan Davies, now off the transfer list, the substitute. And the match got away to a fizzing start from the kick off with Mick Holifield winning a corner. This was cleared to George Wright who ran half the length of the field and forced John Maskell

Blues miss out on top spot

Ilford 1, Wycombe Wanderers 1

REPORT BY STUART EARP

to palm his shot away for a flag kick at the other end. From this kick Trevor Britton's header was pushed away by the goalkeeper for another corner. Not a bad start!

This hectic pace was not to last, however, and Wycombe gradually settled into their rhythm. Howard Kettleborough all but gave them the lead in the 11th minute when he curled a delicate shot towards the far corner but watched the ball hit the post. Kennedy also went close when Peter Gredley headed his 20th minute effort off the line.

Ilford at this stage were looking suspect from set pieces with Calder having trouble in punching the ball away. The crossbar saved the home side a second time after 23 minutes when Pearson's cross struck the woodwork. But then, against the run of play, Ilford snatched a surprise lead.

Paul Birdseye gave away a free kick which Andy McDermid curled into the box. No-one picked up left back Winston McLeod on the far post and the West Indian joyously headed firmly home. The joy was understandable. It was Ilford's first home goal in the league this season after 14 matches.

This served as a lesson to Wycombe who were once again reminded that there are no prizes for pressure. After that breakthrough they never really regained their confidence and were often panicked into mistakes by the eager home players.

A late blitz just before half time almost put the Blues on level terms when they forced four corners in the last seven minutes. During that spell Tony Horseman rifled in a drive that cannoned onto the crossbar with Calder beaten.

Reason for Wycombe's problems was midfield. None of the trio looked happy and both Kennedy and John Priestley were jaded in comparison to their Ilford counterparts. Had these three stamped their authority on the game it would have been very different.

Wycombe's goal, in the 57th minute, was a rather scrambled effort. Birdseye sent a cross into the box which Kettleborough headed down. Holifield's shot was mis-hit but it sent the goalkeeper the wrong way and bounced rather dejectedly into the net.

They all count though and now it was up to Wanderers to add a couple more and sew up the points. They tried... but their finishing let them down time and again.

The front men struggled as well as midfield and Ian Pearson had a particularly unhappy game. He has the ability to beat opponents with his skills but he tries it too often instead of releasing the ball early and he lost possession often by holding on too long.

The chances came thick and fast in the last 15 minutes. Kettleborough headed just over and then Holifield scooped the ball wide from close range. Two minutes later Holifield sprinted through the defence on the left and squared the ball back from the bye-line. Kettleborough was unmarked but got underneath his header which flew over the bar.

Five corners were amassed in the closing stages (Wycombe had 14 in all, Ilford two) and one of the worst misses came from Phillips, up for a set piece in the 86th minute. He sliced his shot wide from about four yards and a minute later Kennedy was robbed of the winner when his fierce drive was tipped over by Calder.

Final opportunity fell to Kettleborough in the dying seconds but in keeping with Wycombe's finishing, he miscued his shot and the chance went begging.

ILFORD: G. Calder, R. Mumford (sub M. Walsh 62 mins), P. Gredley, L. Moss, W. McLeod, A. McDermid, S. Barratt, D. Chambers, G. Lay, T. Britton, G. Wright.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell, P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, R. Davies, H. Kennedy, J. Priestley, M. Holifield, A. Horseman, H. Kettleborough, I. Pearson, Sub A. Davies (not used).

Referee: B. Robinson (Sunbury).

Half-time: 1-0. **Goalscorers:** Ilford — McLeod (26), Wycombe — Holifield (57).